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The Social Questions Bulletin

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THE METHODIST FEDERATION FOR SOCIAL SERVICE

An organization which seeks to abolish the profit system in order to develop a classless society based upon the obligation of mutual service.

150 FIFTH AVENUE, NEW YORK CITY

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METHODISTS AND THE CRISIS

THE CHALLENGE

The social crisis into which the United States, in common with the other capitalist nations, has been plunged by the breakdown of the profit system becomes daily more threatening at three major points:

1. The continuing drop in the standard of living for millions of industrial and white-collar workers, farmers, professional people, small business folk; and the formation of a standing army of unemployed. All these people are now living on the basis of enforced scarcity and organized poverty. 2. Approaching war and increasing war preparations. It is evident that we are moving towards another world war. 3. The emergence of American Fascism. Its economic aspect is here. The politically repressive aspect is being proposed.

This situation constitutes a sharp challenge to those who accept the social implications of our religion.

THE METHODIST FORCES

Obviously, the present socially-minded forces in our church are not in a position effectively to meet the challenge. Individuals who have known for years that the profit system was not in harmony with our religion, and who now recognize that it has broken down, are scattered throughout Methodism. They are to be found among bishops, district superintendents, city preachers, rural preachers; in secretaryships and staffs of boards; in editorships and staffs of our church press; among professors and students in our Methodist educational institutions; among laymen, laywomen, especially church youth. Some of these have long declared their position and have been associated with others of like mind in the Methodist Federation for Social Service, and more recently in the Christian Social Action Movement. The latter is a "movement," not an organization, and most of those leading it belong to the Methodist Federation for Social Service.

In the meantime those forces who are determined to preserve their power and privilege under the profit system are mobilizing for concerted action. They are bringing pressure to bear on preachers and other church leaders who are outspoken against the profit system. Now the Hearst press has opened an attack on the religious forces that are seeking to get rid of capitalism.

This raises the question whether the Methodist forces that are against capitalism should not unite in a bigger and stronger movement. The leaders of the M. F. S. S. and the C. S. A. M. have been discussing this possibility for about a year now, whenever it was possible for them to get together. It is their joint feeling that there are more actual and potential resources in Methodism for the saving of society from the disastrous consequences of Fascist bondage to a dying capitalist order than have yet been mobilized. They agreed that the essentials of a forward movement would be: The tying together of action and study; the enlistment of laymen, women and youth, as well as preachers; field workers to interpret the social message and program and to lead the church forces into action in local social struggles. The distribution of much more printed matter in more popular form; headquarters in the midwest.

CONFERENCES

It was gradually recognized that the best means of promoting such a forward movement was the calling of a national conference this summer. Its objectives were declared to be:

(1) To discover what resources Methodism can throw into the social struggle at

this time. (2) To clarify our minds and strengthen our wills concerning the action that needs to be taken. (3) To determine the kind of organization that this job requires.

It was agreed that time would be saved and confusion avoided in the discussion if this gathering called together only those whose thinking and ethical judgment had reached the point of rejecting the capitalist system. Thus the conference could center on planning and action. Educational discussion to reach those who were moving in this general direction was left for later gatherings.

Two committees were set up, one on arrangements and one on program, the latter with an eastern and a western division. The date was set for August 5 to 9, the place at Evanston, Ill. A group of sponsors was found to underwrite the expense of preparations.

In the course of working out the program unavoidable delays occurred, due to the fact that the committee was working in two sections, and that certain of the responsible people were continually in the field. Finally certain proposals came up which couldn't be settled by correspondence in the time available. When this became evident the members of the western section of the committee proposed that the conference be postponed to a later date and that the office of the M. F. S. S. take the responsibility for calling and organizing it.

The M. F. S. S. office discussed this proposition with the eastern section of the program committee, which voted to recommend to the Executive Committee of the M. F. S. S. that we organize three regional conferences between September and General Conference. These conferences are to discuss action and plans. They are to consist, as was the August conference, of those who are personally through with capitalism and who wish to discover how to put their convictions into action. But it is not proposed to exclude anyone who desires to listen to the discussion in the spirit of earnest inquiry. The participation in the discussion, however, of those who have not reached the point of breaking definitely with the profit system would delay unnecessarily the reaching of conclusions.

These conferences are to be preceded by a Leaders' Retreat, the middle of September, in Pittsburgh, or some other place midway between Chicago and New York. This preliminary gathering will bring together members of both sections of the original program committee; members of the executive committees of the M. F. S. S. and the C. S. A. M.; potential leaders of the three regional conferences and key members of the M. F. S. S. and C. S. A. M. near the seat of the Retreat. This gathering will discuss the basic questions that underly the planning and action program of the regional conferences and of an effective forward movement. These proposals were endorsed by the Executive Committee of the M. F. S. S.

They were also sent on to the members of the western committee. The reply expressed a conviction that a national conference, to be held before General Conference, was also needed. After further discussion the eastern group and the M. F. S. S. staff decided to make further recommendation to the Executive Committee of the M. F. S. S. that such a national conference be held. This was approved.*

A NATIONAL CONFERENCE

It is proposed that this National Conference be held at the seat of the General Conference, or nearby, and for the two days preceding. This meeting will be for the purpose of consolidating and sharpening the findings of the regional conferences. In this way our report and memorials to General Conference will be put into final form. Moreover, if the regional conferences agree about the kind of movement needed to carry forward this work, plans can be completed and personnel and resources can be canvassed at the General Conference.

It is apparent that those elements in our denomination which desire the continuance of the profit system will be active and aggressive at the coming General Conference. Naturally, they do not like what we have been saying in the Bulletin. They desire to take away from us the right to use the name Methodist. But, obviously, this cannot be done. That is not an official term. It has a general use. Nobody can prevent any group from using it.

Another suggestion is being offered, for an official church board to cover the whole field of social education and action, inspired in part by what has happened in the Congregational Church. But, if this were feasible, it would not, as some of its supporters hope, make unnecessary what the M. F. S. S. and the C. S. A. M. are doing. On the contrary, it would make such activities all the more imperative, because official action always becomes timid and stereotyped unless it is continually stimulated from unofficial sources. If, for any reason, the M. F. S. S. should cease to exist, it is perfectly obvious that it would be replaced by something as advanced, or even more advanced, because the historic situation demands it. This is what is happening in other religious groups and in the labor world.

* Gilbert S. Cox, chairman of the C.S.A.M., and Owen M. Geer, its secretary, endorse this general plan for a series of conferences. Dr. Cox wires, "Present social changes make proposed conferences imperative. Attendance most important."

PLANS

The following plans for the proposed conferences are only tentative. The committee that makes them hopes that our membership will consider them carefully and send in suggestions, especially for the regional conferences.

The following dates are suggested because the committee unanimously decided that Harry F. Ward should be present at all of the conferences and these are practically the only dates that he can get away from his teaching: Eastern conference at the Thanksgiving recess; midwestern and Pacific Coast, between January 14th and 31st. A possible fourth conference might be held in the Rocky Mountain area if our members there recommend it because of distance. It is proposed that each regional conference be two days in length, on Wednesday and Thursday, to enable the preachers to attend by car or bus between Sundays.

Please let us know whether you think that three-day instead of two-day conferences are feasible. Obviously, even three days are not long enough for the matter in hand. Consider the fact that while the middle of the week is the best time for preachers, the week-end is a better time for laymen and youth. Can this difficulty be met by following the regional planning and action conferences with local educational conferences, to be organized with the needs of these other groups in mind? Please suggest the best place for the conference in your region.

Also give us your suggestions on the following tentative draft of the program for the regional conferences. It covers six sessions, three each day. To save space the topical discussions are not repeated, just the numbers. Each subject is to be introduced by a 15-minute opening report, followed by discussion and questions. Under each section it is proposed to consider what we want the General Conference to say. The suggested outline assumes the rejection of the capitalist system and the determination to follow the ethical imperatives of our religion to their utmost conclusion.

PROGRAM

I. Unemployment and Poverty.

1. Situation and causes.

The extent of unemployment and poverty; the consequences to society, particularly to youth. Why is it impossible for the profit system to provide the mass consumption without which its mass production fails? Why is it impossible for the capitalist system ever again to give us a rising standard of culture?

2. Points of emphasis in preaching and teaching.

What is the relation of this situation to the promise of the life more abundant; to the hope of a fraternal community? How can the demand for a decent standard of living be related to the need for a new social order? Why cannot the followers of Jesus be content with the return of "prosperity"?

3. Action; experiences and suggestions.

What do we do and how, as churches, preachers, or groups within churches concerning: Local standards of relief and work project wages? Defense of the right to demonstrate, picket, etc. Participation in such actions.

II. The Approach of War.

1. Present danger points: Ethiopia, Germany, Japan, etc.

Why do the occasions for war multiply in the period of capitalist decline?

Our recent expenditures for war. Why?

Why have the peace forces been unable to prevent or limit these preparations?

2. Is our emphasis upon what we must do as individuals, or upon preventing the destruction and moral degradation of another world war?

How shall we expose the fallacy of national defense and patrotism?

Shall we officially advise the church youth whom we have taught that war is unchristian to refuse to participate in or to support it?

3. Shall we participate in strikes and demonstrations against war preparations? With all who are against war?

Shall we distribute anti-war literature when such distribution is forbidden by law?

Shall we prepare to use any breakdown occasioned by an unpopular war to accomplish the changes in the social order demanded by our faith?

III. The Coming of Fascism.

1. What symptoms of Fascism are now present in the United States? Repression? Deceptive economic promises? Use of state power to prolong capitalism? State control of labor?

What is the purpose of Fascism?

Why does capitalism become Fascist in its period of decline?

2. How can we prevent our middle class constituency from being deceived, through both their self-interest and their ideals, by the impossible promises of Fascist leaders?

How can we get them to see that they must be willing to lose their own—in the interests of those who are worse off and of society as a whole—before they can have security for themselves or their children?

How can we make clear our task to prevent the economic aspect of Fascism from developing into the politically repressive form?

3. What are the best tactics to use against local Fascist organizations, meetings, and propaganda?

What can we do to keep open to all people our constitutional civil rights? What can those who renounce violence do to stop legal and illegal attacks on workers, radicals, and unpopular minority groups? Can we all unite on the broad platform of the necessity of preventing violence? (See Crisis Leaflet No. 17.)

IV. Attempts to Reform the Profit System or to Gradually Transform It.

1. How does the New Deal demonstrate that capitalism cannot be successfully reformed? What kind of trade unionism is helping to perpetuate the capitalist system and what kind seeks to change it? Why cannot capitalism be transformed by schemes to redistribute wealth, either by taxation or capital levy?

What progress has the cooperative movement made in getting the profit motive out of its members, in changing the structure of the profit system?

What evidence is there that the capitalist system can be gradually replaced or bought out by municipal or national ownership? Is the question of compensation one of principle or of tactics?

2. How can we best demonstrate the futility of reform? Does our traditional emphasis on conversion help here?

How can we teach our members in unions or cooperatives to get rid of the profit motive and to become transformers of society? How can we use the Christian conception of the community to get people to see the difference between government ownership and social ownership and to work for the latter?

3. How can we get our church members to use their participation in cooperatives to make them instruments of social change? How can they use campaigns for local or national ownership of public utilities to the same end?

V. Essentials in the New Order.

1. What alternative to the profit system is there except a planned and planning social economy? (See Crisis Leaflet No. 7.)

How can such an economy operate except on the basis of social ownership? And on the basis of complete democratic control? (See Crisis Leaflet No. 18.) Also on the basis of the acceptance of the obligation of socially useful labor and its mutual exchange?

2. The above essentials lead to a society without class distinctions or privileges. What is the relation of this to the Christian ideal of the fraternal community?

How can we show the relation of social economic planning with its democratic management, to the motive of mutual aid proclaimed in our gospels?

What relation is there between mutual exchange of socially useful labor and the Christian teaching of service?

3. This kind of a social order is not won without a struggle. How can our people be trained for it by participation in local actions? How can it be kept from becoming violent? By what strategy and tactics can we establish a close connection between immediate demands and long-time ends?

VI. What Kind of Organization Do We Need?

What shall be its objectives? Whom shall it include? Its program of activities? And propaganda? What field work shall it carry on? Where shall its headquarters be? How shall it be supported?

REFERENCES

Our 18 Crisis Leaflets will form the basis of discussion at the regional conferences. We suggest that those planning to attend send to the office soon for the set. (20c, plus 1½c for postage.)

On Living Standards, Actual and Potential: *Pamphlets*—*"America in the Depression," Laidler (10c); *"The Plight of the Share-Cropper," Thomas (10c); *"Plan of Plenty" (10c). *Books*—*"Must We Starve?", Nearing; *"Chart of Plenty," Loeb and Associates.

On War: *Pamphlets*—*"Guns Are Ready," Waldman; "The Arms Inquiry," Christian Century (10c). *Books*—"Merchants of Death," Engelbrecht and Hanighen; *"One Hell of a Business," Engelbrecht; "The Road to War," Millis.

On Fascism: *Pamphlets*—*"What Do You Mean Fascism?"; *"Stop Fascism"; *"Youth Against Fascism"; *"Why Fascism Leads to War," Strachey; *"The Development of Fascism in the United States," Ward. *Books*—*"Fascism and Social Revolution," Dutt; *"The Nazi Dictatorship," Schuman; *"Forerunners of American Fascism," Swing; "Economic Consequences of the New Deal," Stolberg and Vinson.

On Gradualism: *Pamphlet*—*"The State and Revolution," Lenin (10c). *Book*—"Socializing Our Democracy," Laidler.

On the Historic Background of the Crisis and Essentials in the New Order: *Pamphlets*—*"The Communist Manifesto"; *"Socialism, Utopian and Scientific," Engels (25c); also Amos, Jesus, James, John, The Apocalypse.

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* Pamphlets starred may be ordered through our office, 5c each unless otherwise indicated; add 3c for postage. Books starred may be borrowed from our lending library.

A $1 membership brings this Bulletin once a month, except in July and August.